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In Memoriam: Tamar Alexander-Frizer (1945–2023)

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IN MEMORIAM

Tamar Alexander-Frizer (1945–2023)

ELI YASSIF

Tamar Alexander-Frizer, a highly accomplished academic and public figure in Israel passed away March 29, 2023, in Jerusalem. Born in Jerusalem on October 17, 1945, her significant contributions to folklore and Sephardic studies are evident in the three volumes dedicated to her in 2015, which honored her retirement from teaching at Ben-Gurion University of the Negev (Papo et al. 2015). These volumes included a list of her publications, consisting of 145 books, scholarly articles, and folkloric texts. Affirming her influential international reach and the respect she garnered as a scholar and a teacher, those volumes included an international cast of colleagues from Israel, United States, and Spain.

Tamar Alexander-Frizer's academic journey was shaped by her training at two prestigious institutions that greatly influenced her scholarly work. At the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, her *alma mater*, she acquired a solid foundation and comprehensive knowledge of Jewish literary history and the historical-philological research tools for studying Jewish culture. During her time there, she collaborated with Professor Joseph Dan on an extensive research project on Jewish folklore in the Middle Ages. Her second educational pillar was the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), mentored by Professor Robert Georges, a

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Figure 1. Tamar Alexander in 2004. Photograph by Dani Machlis. Creative Commons Attribution Share Alike 4.0 International license.

pioneer in contextual folklore studies. Georges's influence can be seen in many of Alexander-Frizer's publications. She completed her PhD at UCLA in 1977, with both Georges and Professor Arnold Band as her advisors. Her doctoral thesis on the relationship between story and ideology in the thirteenth-century Ashkenazic compilation of moral rules and narrative *Sefer Chasidim* received widespread acclaim and citation after its publication with the title *The Pious Sinner* (Alexander-Frizer 2008).

Tamar Alexander-Frizer's scholarly work can be categorized into three fields, each representing a progression of her interests and advancement in the field. The first area of focus was medieval Hebrew storytelling. Under the guidance of Professor Joseph Dan, she embarked on a comprehensive historical-philological research project, delving into hundreds of manuscripts located in libraries and private collections worldwide. Her discoveries, including previously unknown tales, source analysis, and comparative studies, greatly contributed to the understanding of Jewish folk literature. This research also formed the basis of her UCLA dissertation.

The second field of Alexander-Frizer's scholarly interest was directly related to her personal connection to the Sephardic community, which spoke Ladino, a Judeo-Spanish dialect. Her affinity for the women within this community is evident in her extensive and profound studies over the years, culminating in her seminal work, *The Heart Is a Mirror* (2008; Hebrew edition 1999). This monumental publication serves as a testament to Alexander-Frizer's contributions to Jewish studies, folkloristic theory, fieldwork practices, the understanding of folk performances, genre theory in folklore, and, most importantly, the study of Sephardic heritage from medieval Spain to contemporary communities in Israel and the Diaspora.

The third field in which Alexander-Frizer made significant contributions was the study of folk proverbs. She published two seminal works in this area: *Words Are Better than Bread* (2004) and *La palabra en su hora es oro* (2008, A word in its [right] time is like gold.). Both books explored a large corpus of proverbs collected through fieldwork from informants in Judeo-Spanish communities in Israel and Morocco. These publications aimed to comprehend the ways that folk proverbs reflected the individual and collective identities of communities whose traditions had been passed down for centuries.

In addition to her academic endeavors, Tamar Alexander-Frizer played a notable role in public activities related to folklore, particularly within the Sephardic community to which she belonged. Influenced by Professor Dov Noy, the founder of folklore research in modern Israel and one of her most influential teachers at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, she actively engaged in the community's public events. She organized conferences on Sephardic culture and conducted classes

on the Ladino language. She emerged as a driving force behind the community's achievements over the years. Alexander-Frizer exemplifies the vital connection between scholarly work and communal involvement in the discipline of folkloristics. Her deep engagement with the community enabled her to delve into its rich traditions at a profound level. Conversely, her influential academic contributions and esteemed reputation enhanced the community's social identity and fostered a sense of self-worth.

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